

THE CHAPLAIN AS A TEACHER OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
IN THE MILITARY PULPIT

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1951, the topic of this inquiry has remained harbored within the remote alcoves of my thoughts. From time to time, the frustrations of preaching have excited the mental appetite to scant efforts of improvement. Such pressing matters as busy work and plain vanity have neutralized the efforts. I now propose to discuss the problem of preaching as related to Christian education. I reflect upon the subject from the pew and the pulpit. I first pondered this subject while still a layman.

The Korean Conflict started during my senior year of college. Recall to the military service interrupted my preparation for the Christian ministry. Then, in the midst of war, a thought-provoking situation occurred. A new chaplain dropped by our reserve area to conduct a worship service. It was the standard variety complete with altar kit, steel-helmet pews, and rice-paddy floors. I accompanied a fellow soldier to the service. The sermon was fair. My friend was not impressed. He was a good Christian layman with a strong background of Christian training and nurture. Knowing of my plans to become a minister, he asked me a pointed question.

"Why can't most chaplains preach? I've heard my share of 'em. Why, when our pastor preaches, he teaches inspiringly! Why don't more chaplains do the same?"

Though regarding his statement as too critical, I am forced to confess that all too many chaplains and civilian clergymen give the sermon only superficial consideration and treatment. It is also my feeling that many chaplains and civilian ministers are guilty of preaching

inspiring sermons that are totally devoid of intellectual and rational content. William E. Sangster once treated this same problem by commenting as follows: "It is one of the tragic curiosities of preaching that some men commissioned to give the message seem to have no message to give. Appearing before people with a warrant which they claim to have taken from the pierced hand, they preach without conviction and they are heard without effect. When they have said all, they have said nothing." ¹ If some ministers preach inspirational gems devoid of content, other preach intellectual essays devoid of the inspiration fitting the Holy Spirit.

It is my purpose to define the mechanics and doctrinal aspects of educational preaching in general terms. It is, further, my objective to explore the freedoms and the objectives of the Protestant Chaplain in his office as teacher through the preaching of the Word.

The first area of discussion will center briefly around an analysis of the present condition of Christian nurture and Christian education among Protestant adults in the churches of our nation and in the United States Army. The next chapter will then place the chaplain in his proper context by relating him to the needs of the military congregation, to the scope and demands of his total program, and to his spiritual obligations as a teacher and preacher of the Word. In the final section, I will develop my concept of a general process through which the chaplain can become proficient and effective in the role of preacher-teacher. The chaplain can never escape from the obligation of the Great Commission.

I. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN PROTESTANTISM TODAY

Before the chaplain can extend an effective ministry, he must know the needs of those to whom he ministers. The effective religious program must be well balanced and sufficiently comprehensive to extend complete religious coverage. One of the most important requirements of growing Christianity is a good system of Christian education. Most Protestant denominations seek to fulfill the educational obligation through confirmation classes, youth study groups, released-time classes, adult education and Sunday church schools. The main educational tool, however, is the Sunday church school,

A. Current Trends and Weaknesses.

Many excellent Sunday church schools are functioning under the guidance of military chaplains. An added number of chaplains are also offering successful confirmation programs and adult education classes. The Christian movement in the military is well abreast of the civilian counterpart. In spite of continued progress, a spiritual void continues to exist. The military parish is no exception.

It is of further interest that available statistics on church and church school membership reveal a lack of regard by adults toward adult Christian education. In a 1955 survey on church and church school membership, Father John A. Hardon, S. J., compares the membership figures of roughly 268 church bodies located in the United States. Though five years old, these figures reflect upon a few broad areas relative to this discussion. I have chosen three Protestant denominations as fairly representative of greater Protestantism. They include The Methodist

Church, The Southern Baptist Convention, and The Evangelical and Reformed Church. The Methodist Church reported a total church membership of 9,292,046 and a church school enrollment of 6,810,661. Church membership exceeds church school enrollment by a figure of 2,481,385. The figures for the Southern Baptist Convention reveal a church membership of 8,467,439 and a church school enrollment of 6,632,418. Church membership exceeds church school enrollment by a figure of 1,835,021. My own denomination, The Evangelical and Reformed Church reports a total membership of 545,512. Church membership exceeds church school enrollment by a figure of 198,765.²

These denominations all list church membership figures that exceed church school enrollment figures by 20-25%. Before making an evaluation, it is necessary to consider a few facts. Not all members attend. Not all persons attending are members. The denominations discussed report only communicant membership. The Southern Baptist Convention accepts persons into full membership at an earlier age than is customary among other denominations.

A few points, however, remain obvious. The church membership statistics involve persons primarily of teen-age or adult status while the church school statistics include all ages. The casual observer can conclude that the majority of persons attending church schools are younger children while most of those persons attending church are teen-age youth and adults. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that less than 20% of all adult church members attend Sunday church schools.

B. The Situation Compared in the Civilian and the Military Contexts.

The program evidenced in the average military chapel again compares to the civilian situation. I have observed through personal experience and from the experiences of fellow chaplains that adult teaching staffs and adult church school classes reflect attendance figures from 75-80% smaller than those listed for church attendance. For example, the Forsyth area at Fort Riley, Kansas, supports an average chapel attendance of three-hundred persons per Sunday while those attending teenage and adult church school classes total about sixty persons or less per Sunday. This figure includes teaching staff.

C. Christian Education in the Army Chapel Program.

I conclude that the military chapel program is comparable, in progress and in weakness, to the Protestant Churches of our nation. I further conclude that only 15-20% of the active adults involved in civilian church activities and in military chapel programs attend Sunday church school sessions. Though a reasonably small percentage of adults participate in any type of Christian education experience, there is indication that more adults are turning with interest to Christian education activities.

What then is the role of the pulpit in the mission of Christian teaching? Is it to remain on the fringe of the educational program or is it to be the verbal fountain head from which Christian truth and inspiration flow into all areas of the total religious program? Today, the average Christian congregation is spiritually illiterate and poorly motivated. This can only be corrected when the occupant of the pulpit

is moved by the Holy Spirit to preach the Word. All fruitful Christian faith and activity is based upon the Word. The pastor, when preaching the Word, is a teacher of Christian truth as seen in its biblical-historical context and related to the present situation of man.

At the day of ascension, Jesus said to the eleven:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." ³

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the eleven built the church and instructed its followers. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the military chaplain must follow in this train. We must teach our people that they might witness.

II. THE MILITARY PULPIT AS THE SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Most clergymen of the Protestant faith agree that preaching is still a relatively important task for the parish ministry. There is, however, wide disagreement as to the centrality of preaching in proportion to the importance of the other pastoral functions such as counseling, visitation, administration, programming, and organizing. In the second place, ministers tend to disagree as to the objective of the sermon. Some regard the sermon as an inoculation of inspiration while others use it for instructional purposes. Some pastors are pure prophets while others soothe and reassure the flock with spiritual tranquilizers. There are even a few ministers who look to the preaching of the Word as a necessary evil. Most ministers tend to regard the sermon as a combination of two or more of these elements. In placing the chaplain into his proper context, I will first discuss the relationship of his homiletic duties to his other functions. The remainder of this chapter will then be devoted to the objectives and purposes of the sermon.

A. The Demands of Professional Duties in the Schedule of the Military Chaplain.

The military chaplain is confronted with the situation similar to that plaguing his civilian counterpart. All clergymen are faced with a fantastic challenge. Never before has the professional ministry been confronted with such a demanding and diverse calling. Christianity is and must be involved in all areas of our contemporary and complex way of life. The demands upon the time of the ordinary pastor are so great that outstanding church leaders such as Dr. Seward Hiltner and Dr. H. Richard Niebuhr have written extensive books and articles upon the subject.

Dr. Hiltner looks at the pastor in relation to his calling as one who is shepherd to his flock. The shepherd must minister to all needs. He places the entire ministry within a framework referred to as "Pastoral Theology." He structures the concept by designating the pastor as a healer, a sustainer, and a guide. He further designates the cognate factors as communication and organization.⁴ Dr. Niebuhr, in somewhat the same spirit, refers to the minister as a "Pastor-Director."

The chaplain is both a shepherd and a pastor-director. While the normal civilian pastor is usually responsible only for the present and prospective members of his congregation, the typical chaplain has the responsibility of providing a ministry to one or more entire military units. The chaplain also has an even greater task of executive directing than does the average civilian pastor. This is a necessity within a structured military framework where the chaplain is concurrently advisor to the commander and responsible staff operator and coordinator of the entire religious program within his organization.

The saving factor lies in the military command and staff structure. Most duty chaplains occupy spaces in chains of command blessed with supervisory chaplains charged with missions to support the subordinate chaplains in their pastoral missions. The chaplain also enjoys the added luxury of an enlisted assistant.⁵ If employed wisely, the assistant is invaluable to the chaplain in the accomplishment of the religious program.

It is, therefore, obvious that the military chaplain is faced with the challenge of an overwhelming task. It is even more significant

that he has, at his disposal, means by which the task can be effectively accomplished.

B. The Place and Priority of Preaching in the Schedule of the Military Chaplain.

Within the framework of this calling, the chaplain is still a preacher of the Word. The question still remains as to how the chaplain can do all things well. Is there adequate time for the busy chaplain to prepare and preach well-prepared sermons which meet the needs of his congregation? How does valuable time occupied with sermon preparation fit into the schedule along with staff meetings, visits, conferences, and administration? Rev. John R. Scotford supplied an answer to this problem when he stated: "If they are to get the religious work done to which they were called and for which they were trained, Protestant ministers must place themselves under a stronger self-discipline."⁶ It is interesting to note that great churchmen like St. Paul, St. Boniface, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley were not only great leaders and administrators but were also outstanding pastors and preachers. Their mutual secret was self-discipline. Such self-discipline finds its source in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit demands time in excess of forty hours a week.

1. The chaplain and his obligation to preach.

It remains for the individual chaplain to develop his own pattern of self-discipline. It is also necessary to establish a system of priorities. The most decisive mission must be accomplished first. I feel that Rev. Scotford best sums up the problem when he concluded that:

"Sober thought tells us that the administration of an institution is the least of our responsibilities. Our primary task is to bring the Christian faith to men through public preaching and private counseling. Unless we do this, it will not get done. In the sort of a world in which we find ourselves it is also necessary that we concern ourselves with buildings, budgets, and the organizing of the efforts of others. This cannot be escaped. We should discharge these responsibilities as quickly and efficiently as possible - and then get on to more fundamental matters."⁷

2. The chaplain and his qualifications as a preacher.

One of these fundamental matters is preaching. By virtue of ordination, ecclesiastical indorsement, and federal commission, the chaplain is naturally presumed to be a preacher of the Word. It states in FM 16-5, The Chaplain, that: "Protestant chaplains are required to conduct a general service of worship which is acceptable and meaningful to the maximum number of Protestant personnel in the command."⁸ Without a sermon, few Protestant services would be either acceptable or meaningful. Indeed, the preaching of the Word is central to the Protestant Reformation. It is interesting to note that most Protestant churches, in keeping with Reformation tradition, lay great stress upon the sermon.

This fact is evidenced by the liturgical wording of the ordination services used in various Protestant denominations. Typical of these are the orders of ordination used by the Episcopal and Lutheran bodies. The candidate for priesthood in the Episcopal Church is questioned as follows: "Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain

all Doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Christ? Are you determined, out of said Scriptures, to instruct the people committed to your charge; and to teach nothing, as necessary to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by Scripture?" The candidate answers: "I am so persuaded....?"⁹ The Lutheran approach is in the form of a charge. The candidate is enjoined to: "...give diligence always to preach the Word of God in its purity, as found in the Prophetic and Apostolic Writings, and as taught in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church."¹⁰

The majority of the Protestant clergy, including Protestant chaplains, have pledged themselves along these same lines. The pledge has been made following years of highly specialized training. Chaplains are exceptionally well trained. The chaplain is a qualified preacher and teacher. He is obliged by conscience, training, vows, and Army Regulations to preach and teach the Word of God. This does not mean that the chaplain will restrict the teaching function to the pulpit. It simply means that the pulpit must once again become the anchor of the Christian Church in the sea of the Word.

C. The Relationship of Preaching to the Total Program and to Christian Education.

Pulpit teaching must effect every aspect of the church program. The preaching aspect must lead men to God while the teaching manifestation must instruct them in His ways. The teaching, begun in the pulpit, must lead the congregation to "hunger and thirst after righteousness." It must lead persons into other areas of the church program and into the

Kingdom of God. The chaplain must teach the members of the congregation who must in turn witness and teach to others. In this way, the Word becomes infectious. The Word must first be taught through preaching. Notice the closeness of the terms teaching, preaching, and Word. The three go hand in hand.

Dr. John Knox comments that: "The modern minister, like the ancient bishop, combines as far as one man can the functions of all three of the primitive types. (preachers, teachers, prophets) He is the pastor and the administrative head of the church, the leader of worship, and the preacher. Our concern with him is in the last of these capacities, and in that capacity he corresponds most closely with the teacher..... The word "teaching," however, implies no limited range of content. In the ancient sense it is concerned with nothing less than the proclamation and interpretation of the gospel - the announcement of God's deed in Christ and the opening up of the whole vast wealth of its meaning for human history and for every man. And the criterion for its success is the building up of the church both in numbers and in understanding and devotion."¹¹

III. THE CHAPLAIN AND HIS PROCESS OF GROWTH THROUGH PREACHING

Having contended that the chaplain functions in the vital role as preacher-teacher by virtue of calling, training, ordination, and federal commissioning, I further maintain that he must be a good steward of his vocation. He must continue to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and grace. The Holy Spirit motivates chaplains to help themselves. Discipline, tools, and study are necessary to continued spiritual and intellectual growth. Such growth results from a searching study of the Holy Scriptures.

A. The Bible, His Source of Material.

The chaplain finds his message in the Bible. His message is the Word made flesh in the form of Christ Jesus. It is this Christ for which the congregation reaches. It is this Christ which is the hope of the world. It remains for the chaplain to introduce and reintroduce this Christ to the seeking and the faithful. All men have within them the drive to worship God. If they cannot find Him within the framework of His revelation, they will misdirect this drive and claim or invent false gods. The chaplain has the urgent task, therefore, of teaching the Word through preaching. Since the Word is found in the Bible, preaching ought to be essentially biblical. John Knox reminds us that: "Preaching in the early centuries and preaching in all of the most vital and creative periods of the church's history has been biblical preaching.... We use the Bible in preaching because it is great literature, because it is our literature, and because it is, in a very true and distinctive sense, God's literature."¹² In the same vane, Knox concludes that: "The Bible,

therefore, is not merely useful in preaching, it is absolutely indispensable. It is more than a supremely useful resource in preaching; it belongs essentially to the very source of preaching. It is not only true that preaching should be biblical; authentic preaching has to be."¹³

The Bible is that History of Redemption which records God's entrance into human history. It records the manner in which God made a covenant with men. It records how God fulfilled the Old Covenant with a New Covenant in the form of Christ Jesus who invites all people in all times and in all places to become God's children. It remains for the chaplain to interpret this message with relevance to the contemporary situation of man.

B. The Message for the Teacher-Preacher.

The chaplain is faced with an ecumenical situation. This provides both opportunity and potential pitfall, since chaplains are tempted to remain shallow in order to avoid denominational conflict. A few chaplains will, on the other hand, plague the faithful with their respective sectarian doctrines. There is a more profitable way. There is a message common to all Christians. This is the message of the Early Church. It is both deep and comprehensive. It is scriptural and Christ-centered. It is much more than just a reemphasis of biblical passages delivered up on a platter in a proof-text manner. This message is kerygmatic in content and apologetic in scope. It makes Christ available in terms understandable to all men in all ages.

This message is found in primitive form in the book of Acts. As Blackwood once stated: "The record on the Book of Acts suggests some

of the principles which should govern all our preaching from the Bible."¹⁴ The key sections are the comprehensive sermons of Peter located within the first ten chapters of the book of Acts. Dr. William M. Ramsay points out that the centrality of Peter's message was God's saving act in Christ Jesus. Ramsay then develops the aspects of Peter's preaching. To Peter and the Early Church, Jesus was a man of five demensions. Not only was Jesus the Messiah of Jewish expectation, but he was also the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Not only was Jesus a man on earth, but he was also the risen and exalted Lord. Above all, the Christ was a living and present power. It is interesting to note how these five aspects tie in with the various books and writers of the Old and New Testaments.

The book of Revelation deals strongly with the messiahship of Christ while the book of Hebrews deals with Him in relation to the Old Testament. The Synoptic Gospels tell us of Jesus as a man on earth. Paul is vitally interested in Jesus as the risen and exalted Lord. The Gospel of John gives us Jesus as a living and present power. It is also interesting to note that Peter draws heavily upon the Old Testament for source material.¹⁵

This was the message with which the Early Church won the Western World. It is the message with which we can preserve the world. It is a message designed to reconcile men to God and to one another. It is a message of inexhaustable value to chaplains laboring in an ecumenical context.

C. Methods and Techniques Useful in Preaching.

Every chaplain will naturally preach the message in his own style and use his own approach. As trained clergymen, most chaplains are capable of more effective preaching. Again, the secret is preparation. I personally feel that every pastor ought to preach in keeping with the best aspects of his own personality. Perplexing as it may seem, delivery is a major factor in preaching. Content is even more important.

It has been my pleasure in the past two months to worship at services conducted by Robert J. McCracken of Riverside Church, Norman Vincent Peale of the Marble Collegiate Church, John Sutherland Bonnell of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, and Ralph W. Sockman of Christ Methodist Church. All of these prominent New York City pastors are accomplished preachers. It is natural that their talents vary. For example, Peale uses conversational delivery at the expense of biblical content while Bonnell presents structured biblical content at the sacrifice of delivery. McCracken and Sockman display balanced ability in all aspects of preaching. It is interesting to note that McCracken and Sockman are primarily known as preachers while Bonnell and Peale are known as pastoral counselors.

Several strong points were mutual and consistent in the preaching of Sockman, McCracken, and Bonnell. Their sermons were biblical. Their sermons were educational. In all three cases, the teaching motive was strongly evidenced. They successfully applied the biblical message to the contemporary situation. All three pastors spoke intelligently

and plainly. All conversation was understandable to the average adult. In all three meditations, the themes evolved from the Old Testament context. Christ, however, became the central object in each instance. Christ was then related to the worshiper. These masters of the pulpit made every effort to preach and teach Christ in terms both challenging and understandable. This last point is paramount.

Dr. Paul Tillich contends that revelation can only be received if it is understood. If revelation is to be transformed into saving faith, it must be comprehended by man through reason. Thus, revelation must be reasonable. To Tillich, Christ is revealed to man by God's saving act of grace when Christ, the Logos - the Word made Flesh, is correlated to and received by man in his God-given capacity to reason.¹⁶

If I understand Tillich correctly, I maintain the validity of his approach on this point. It seems to me, then, that the chaplain has powerful resources at his disposal through which he can accomplish his preaching mission of inspired teaching. In the first place, the chaplain has the message as revealed in Christ and preserved in the Bible. Like Sockman, McCracken, and Bonnell, he has the basic ability to develop the elements of good preaching. Like all ministers in all ages, he serves a congregation possessed with reason and obsessed with a quest for holiness. It remains for the chaplain, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to bring God to men and men to God.

D. Situations Peculiar to the Military Chaplain.

Throughout the course of his ministry, the chaplain must continue to grow in knowledge and grace. It is, therefore, necessary that

study and meditation be basic disciplines in the daily life of every chaplain. This means that he must maintain a good library. This can be done in spite of frequent changes of station. It clearly states in paragraph 8 of AR 55-71 that: "Army and Air Force military personnel may ship professional books, papers, and equipment at government expense." In a garrison situation, the chaplain normally maintains a study comparable to that of the civilian pastor.

This situation is greatly altered by field and combat assignments. In spite of this, it is still vital for the chaplain to maintain a discipline of study. There are three basic types of study material which I regard as essential in a field or combat situation. They include selected paper-bound books, religious journals and periodicals, and a good cross-referenced Bible complete with a brief commentary as provided by either the Moffett Translation, the Schofield Bible, or the Revised Standard Version. All of these materials can be transported and protected in two or three caliber .50 ammunition boxes. The chaplain is, thus, provided with a small library that is both sufficient and flexible.

It now remains for the chaplain to adapt his resources to the context and the congregation at hand. In some cases, the worship service will be but one among several major features of a large total program. In other situations, such as field and combat, the worship service will remain the only opportunity for worship and Christian nurture. In all cases, the chaplain must fit the absolute and the eternal Gospel truths into flexible situations. At times, it is possible to relate a series of sermons to many aspects of the corporate program. At other times, a

single sermon must be the church program. In all cases, the sermon must be coordinated to the spirit of worship and to the needs of the congregation. I find it helpful to use the church year as a guide. Christmas is still Christmas whether it be celebrated in a prison camp, fox hole, or post chapel.

A good sermon is easily supplemented with a tract or pamphlet appropriate to the subject. It is wise for each chapel to support, from the chaplains' fund, an appropriately stocked literature rack. Appropriate tracts can also be made available in the field. I recall having received a tract from a chaplain during my tour as an enlisted man in the Korean conflict. Both the sermon and the tract were related to Easter. Both sustained me in the hectic days that followed. The tract related me to the sermon and the sermon related me to Christ. In the midst of war, Christ brought his influence to bear on our lives because the Word was taught through preaching.

E. The Challenge for the Chaplain to Teach Through Preaching.

The challenge is clear. As Bishop Oxnham points out, we are pastors in a revolutionary age.¹⁷ The military context provides both fluctuation and growth. The military family serves in a world of uncertainty. It is a world of fears and a world of hope. The soldier of the United States Army stands ever ready to sacrifice for the national interest and for the preservation of world order and peace. The chaplain's ministry must be one of stability in an unstable world. Throughout centuries of conflict and revolution, the Christian Church has ultimately stood for the preservation of truth. The Church of Christ is

at its best in the hour of conflict. The Church has seen its finest hours when the unchanging Word of God has entered into man-made crisis to order the course of struggle. Today, as never before, the chaplain must proclaim the pure Word of God. Through preaching, he must teach the Word as related to the needs and potentialities of the military congregation.

IV. CONCLUSION

When preaching and teaching relate the Word of God to the needs of men, the Holy Spirit is active in sustaining the Church of Jesus Christ. The chaplain is pastor of Christ's Church in a military context. It remains for him to perfect the art of instructional and inspirational preaching in order that the Word made flesh might become the saving and sustaining force in the life of the military congregation and in the lives of its members.

Within the entire scope of pastoral care and theology, the chaplain must use his office as preacher-teacher for the purpose of building and training his congregation into a force worthy of its place in the Kingdom of God and effective in its outreach and guiding influence in the military community of the United States Army.

The chaplain alone is ordained by his church and commissioned by his government to accomplish this mission. To work toward the accomplishment of this mission is both my greatest privilege and final obligation.

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